

Frequently Asked Questions about the Internet and the Web

by Kevin Savetz

WHAT IS A CLIENT?

"Client" is the name for any program that can send and receive information to and from the Internet. Your Web browser -- Netscape or Microsoft Internet Explorer or whatever you use -- is a client. Web browsers can access many different sorts of information: Web sites (naturally), gopher sites, FTP archives and so on. Other clients do more specific tasks. The electronic mail program that's built into CompuServe is a client too.

A client -- no matter what it does -- needs to send and receive information to and from another computer on the Internet. The computer that a client gets information from is called a server. (You've probably heard that word before: Web server, mail server, Usenet server and so on.)

When you dial up to CompuServe, your computer makes an Internet connection. So, while you're online, you can use just about any Internet client. All you have to do is start Netscape Navigator, Internet Explorer or any other client while your CompuServe software is also running and you are online.

Where can you download clients? Point your Web browser to Stroud's Consummate Winsock Applications list at <http://www.stroud.com/> -- this site is a thorough list of Internet clients for Windows. There you'll find programs like WinWeather, which provides up-to-date weather reports; Personal Stock Monitor, a program that displays stock prices on the screen; Internet Phone, which lets you talk with online friends; and many others.

WHAT IS A URL?

URL stands for Universal Resource Locator. A URL is an "address" pointing to a certain site on the Internet. You can think of a URL as a road map that the computer uses to help you get to a particular Internet site.

Here are a few example URLs:

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http://www.hotbot.com/news/  
ftp://mirrors.aol.com/pub/  
gopher://gopher.tc.umn.edu/
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Although these may look like meaningless jumbles of letters, dots and slashes, they do mean something. The first part of the URL (<http://>, <ftp://> or <gopher://>) tells the computer what type of Internet resource you want to access -- a Web site, an FTP site or a gopher site. (There are other types as well, but these are the most common.)

The next part tells the system what computer you want to connect with -- for instance, the Hotbot search engine, a computer at America Online, or at the University of Minnesota.

The last part of the URL indicates what file you want to access once you reach that particular computer. That is, what information on that computer do you want to access? (If this final part of the address is not given, as in the third example above, you will find yourself at the site's main welcome page -- or "home page".)

WHY DO SOME WEB PAGE URLS NOT START WITH WWW?

There are few hard and fast rules about URLs. Although many Web sites have "www" as part of their URL (such as <http://www.hotbot.com>), there is no law saying this must be so. The first thing after the <http://> is the name of the Web server to which you're connecting. Like a person, you can name a computer anything -- fred, barney, wilma, or the ever-popular name "www".

WHAT IS HTML?

HTML stands for HyperText Markup Language. HTML is a simple programming language used to format documents for display on the World Wide Web. When displayed using a World Wide Web browser, documents created with HTML may include text and graphics, formatting, and hypertext links to other information.

WHAT IS HTTP?

When you see a URL that begins with "<http://>", you know that address points to a Web page. HTTP stands for "hypertext transfer protocol." Hypertext transfer protocol is one of the behind-the-scenes protocols that computers on the Internet use to exchange information. Specifically, HTTP is used when you are visiting Web pages. Your request to get a certain bit of information from the Web is sent using HTTP. The information you requested is sent back using that protocol, too.

WHAT IS A CACHE?

The cache is a function of the Web browser that speeds up access to Web pages that you visit more than once. When you visit a Web page, certain information about that page, such as graphics, is stored on your hard disk. When you revisit that page, the information can be reloaded from your hard disk, which is faster than downloading that same information from the Internet again.

WHY DOES A WEB SITE ASK ME FOR A PASSWORD?

Most -- but not all -- Internet resources that you will discover are free. That is, your only charge is what you pay your Internet service provider -- no more, no less. Some sites on the Internet charge an additional fee for their products and services. Some other sites are simply closed to the general public -- perhaps only students at a particular university are allowed to access certain Web pages set up for them.

Occasionally, you may come across a Web page that asks for your username and password. These sites are asking for your username and password for THAT site; you should NOT enter your ISP or CompuServe password if asked on the Web.

If you want to access a private, password-protected Web site, you need to get access from the maintainers of the site. Most "closed access" Web pages also have a "public" area, which tells how you can get access to the private area.